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SUBJECT: CHARGE CONVOKED OVER PUNCH ARTICLE

REF: ABUJA 2242

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Thomas Furey for Reasons 1.4 (b) & (d)
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1. (C) Acting Under Secretary for Regions and International Organizations in Nigeria's Foreign Ministry (MFA) A. C. Ariyo convoked Charge during the evening of 17 November on instructions of the MFA's Permanent Secretary to relay a message from President Obasanjo. Ariyo was anxious to meet an evening deadline, after which he had been instructed to "report to the Villa" (the Presidential Offices).

2. (C) On arrival, Ariyo wasted little time saying that the "Punch" article was an "embarrassing topic to you and us" and that the GON wanted confirmation that "the letter exists." He protested the story and said that "such things should not come from our friends." He "demanded" the Embassy issue a news item "dissociating itself from the news." Commenting that President Obasanjo "does not respond to blackmail," Ariyo said the news item and the letter, if it exists, amounts to "interference in Nigeria's domestic affairs."

3. (C) Charge assured Ariyo that no letter had been delivered and that the USG would undertake to clear up any misunderstanding caused by the news item. He speculated that the source for the article was the 24 October press conference by A/S Frazer (reftel). Charge assured Ariyo that the Embassy would keep him informed of any press statement to be issued by the USG.

4. (C) Separately, in a conversation with PolCouns, one of the Punch's senior editors in Abuja said that the article was sourced from a tape of the 24 October A/S Frazer press conference. In the confusion after the death of Nigeria's first lady and the Bellview airline disaster, he said, the paper had not been able to follow up. "We needed to add something to make it fresh, otherwise it would seem we were recycling old news," he said, explaining the decision to refer to a letter. In spite of the ripples the article is still causing in Nigeria, until now the only international news agency to cover the story is Xinhua.

5. (C) COMMENT: The publication of this article is not notable by Nigeria's journalistic standards. Journalists and editors are well versed in "spicing up" articles to attract an audience. However, the importance the publication has reached within the Nigerian government and the strength of the GON's response cannot be explained absent a serious consideration of a third term bid by President Obasanjo.
FUREY